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Background of the Invention

A number of types of radiological events produce two emission photons which travel outward in exactly opposite directions. For example, a positron-electron annihilation event produces such an oppositely directed photon pair. Coincidence imaging systems take advantage of this geometric property in spatially localizing the radiological event to a line of response (LOR). The LOR is defined as the line connecting two simultaneous radiation detection events, which are presumed to correspond to detection of the two oppositely directed photons. Two detection events are typically judged to be simultaneous, or coincident, if both detections occur within a preselected coincidence time window. The radiological event, e.g. the positron-electron annihilation, will have occurred at some point along the LOR. Ideally, for an approximate point source which generates many positron-electron annihilation events within a very confined space, the LOR corresponding to each annihilation event will pass through the point

Non-idealities in real detection systems, such as mechanical misalignments, degrade image resolution. For example, misalignment of the radiation detectors blurs the image. The precision with which the radiation detectors can be mechanically aligned is limited by the weight and bulkiness of the shielded detectors, and the alignment precision required for adequate image resolution is often not practically attainable by purely mechanical procedures. Alignment-related resolution problems are particularly acute for positron coincidence imaging using a multi-head single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) gamma camera with coincidence circuitry, often referred to as a gamma-PET imaging system. The gamma-PET provides a versatile and less expensive alternative to a dedicated PET imaging system, but the typically large heads and rotating gantry complicate mechanical alignment.

Improved resolution can be obtained by following the mechanical alignment with a calibration step. The calibration step preferably determines correction factors for the positional coordinates of each detector. The correction factors may subsequently be applied during data acquisition or analysis to improve image resolution. Gamma-PET systems have been calibrated using a SPECT data acquisition mode, the results of which are applied when operating the system in a PET or SPECT imaging mode. This approach corrects for the tangential detector head coordinate. However, SPECT is not strongly sensitive to the radial and orientational detector coordinate parameters. An additional disadvantage of calibration in

SPECT mode is that subsequent to calibration the detector heads are re-positioned into the PET configuration, which may introduce additional misalignment not accounted for by the prior SPECT calibration.

5 The present invention contemplates a calibration procedure for coincidence imaging systems such as gamma-PET and dedicated PET systems, which overcomes the above shortcomings and others.

Summary of the Invention

10 In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, a method for calibrating a coincidence imaging system which includes a plurality of radiation detectors is disclosed. A plurality of coincidence radiation events associated with a point radiation source are measured.
15 Initial values are assigned for a set of fitting parameters. A minimization algorithm is applied, which includes calculating lines of response (LOR) based upon the fitting parameters and the measured radiation events, generating a figure of merit characterizing the apparent
20 size of the point radiation source based upon the LOR's, and optimizing the fitting parameters to produce a minimized figure of merit. After the minimization, a correction factor relating to a positional coordinate of a detector is extracted from the fitting parameters.

25 In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a method for imaging using a plurality of radiation detectors is disclosed. A plurality of coincidence radiation events associated with a point radiation source are measured. Initial values are
30 assigned for at least one fitting parameter. Lines of response (LOR) are calculated based upon the at least one fitting parameter and the measured radiation events. A figure of merit is generated that characterizes the apparent size of the point radiation source based upon the
35 LOR's. The at least one fitting parameter is optimized using a minimization algorithm which includes iteratively

repeating the calculating and generating steps to produce a minimized figure of merit. At least one correction factor is extracted from the at least one optimized fitting parameter. A set of radiation data is acquired from an associated subject. The radiation data is corrected for camera misalignment by correcting the spatial coordinates of the detected radiation events using the at least one correction factor. An image representation is reconstructed from the corrected radiation data.

Preferably, the at least one fitting parameter includes a parameter related to the radial positional coordinate of a detector, a parameter related to the tangential positional coordinate of a detector, and a parameter related to the orientational positional coordinate of a detector. For a multiple-head imaging system, the fitting parameters preferably include: Δr_i , $i=1$ to N , where Δr_i is a correction for the radial coordinate of the i th detector; Δt_j , $j=1$ to N , where Δt_j is a correction for the tangential coordinate of the j th detector; and $\Delta \theta_k$, $k=2$ to N , where $\Delta \theta_k$ is a correction for the orientational coordinate of the k th detector.

The figure of merit is preferably generated by summing the distance or the square of the distance of closest approach of each LOR to a spatial point, in which case the positional coordinates of the spatial point are fitting parameters. Preferably, LOR's whose distance of closest approach is greater than a preselected distance are discarded. Alternatively, the figure of merit is generated by obtaining the crossing point or the distance of closest approach of each pair of LOR's and calculating the standard deviation of the crossing points or the obtained distances.

In accordance with yet another aspect of the present invention, a method of PET imaging is disclosed. Coincidence radiation events from a calibration source are detected with at least two detector heads. Correction

factors that correct for mechanical misalignment of the detector heads are calculated from the coincidence detected calibration source radiation. During a diagnostic imaging procedure performed on a subject, image data are generated in response to radiation collected with the detector heads. The image data are corrected with the correction factors. The corrected image data are reconstructed into an image representation.

In accordance with still yet another aspect of the present invention, a coincidence imaging system is disclosed. The system includes a gantry. A plurality of flat panel detectors are disposed about the gantry. A data memory stores measured data about radiation events detected by the detectors. A calibration memory stores a plurality of calibration parameters for correcting data measured during a patient scan. A processor in communication with the calibration memory and with the data memory calculates the calibration parameters by a minimization algorithm that includes optimizing fitting parameters with respect to acquired radiation data associated with a point radiation source.

Preferably, the calibration parameters include parameters relating to positional coordinates of the plurality of detectors. The gantry is preferably rotatable. The figure of merit is preferably generated by summing the square of the distance of closest approach of each LOR to a spatial point, in which case the positional coordinates of the spatial point are fitting parameters. Alternatively, the figure of merit is generated by obtaining the crossing point of each pair of LOR's and calculating the variance of the crossing points. To reduce noise, the minimization algorithm preferably discards measured data about radiation events whose energy is outside a preselected energy range.

One advantage of the present invention is that the calibration is performed in coincidence imaging mode

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that it provides improved image quality.

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Brief Description of the Drawings

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a gamma-PET system;

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system in which one head has a radial misalignment Δr ;

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FIGURE 4 shows two radiation detection events corresponding to a single electron-positron annihilation event, along with the spatial coordinate systems used in tabulating and analyzing detection data;

FIGURE 6 is a diagrammatic illustration of the calculation of another preferred figure of merit.

The invention will be described with reference to a three-head gamma-PET system. However, it is to be appreciated that the invention is not so limited, and may instead be applied to other coincidence imaging systems such as dedicated PET systems, systems with two or more heads, and other systems that reconstruct images based on a line of response.

With reference to FIGURE 1, a detector system 10 includes detector heads 12, in the instant gamma-pet system three heads denoted 12₁, 12₂, and 12₃. Each head includes a detector processor unit 14₁, 14₂, 14₃ which identifies the coordinates of a radiation detection event on the detector face. As shown in FIGURE 1, the detectors are mounted on a gantry 16 at 0°, 90°, and 270° orientations. However, other numbers and orientations of heads can be used. The specified orientations are to be taken as approximate values only, because as noted above mechanical alignment is not precise. It is also pointed out that the gamma-PET system is a versatile medical imaging system which also includes SPECT capability. The gantry 16 is preferably rotatable. For nuclear medicine imaging, a subject (not shown) is positioned in the receiving area located within gantry 16. For calibration, a point source 18 is positioned in the receiving area, as

shown. Of course, for medical diagnostic imaging the point source is replaced by an associated patient.

With continuing reference to FIGURE 1, radiation detection events detected by detector system 10 are collected by a LOR calculating circuit 20. The LOR calculator 20 includes a coincidence detector 22 that determines when two events are within a preselected temporal window of being simultaneous. When two events are determined to be coincident, the identification of the detector heads, the coordinates of the radiation detection point on each detecting head, and the angular orientation of the gantry are supplied to a PET LOR calculator 24 that calculates a ray or line between the two radiation detection points. The spatial coordinates of the radiation detection events in the heads are corrected by correction factors retrieved from a correction memory 26. For example, the retrieved correction factors are offsets that a correction processor 28 uses to adjust the apparent spatial locations of the radiation events in the heads prior to the line of response (LOR) calculation. Alternatively, the line of response can be calculated first and then corrected with the correction factors.

In SPECT imaging, the identification of the detecting head, the coordinates on the detecting head, the angular orientation of the gantry and heads, and identification of the collimator characteristics of the head collimator are communicated to a SPECT line of response calculator 30 that calculates a trajectory or line traversed by the received radiation. Correction factors from the calibration memory 26 are again retrieved and used by a correction processor 28' to correct the SPECT trajectory or LOR.

The acquired and corrected LOR data are preferably stored in a data memory or buffer 32. A data reconstruction processor 34 reconstructs an electronic image representation from the LOR data stored in data memory 32 and stores the resultant image representation in

an image memory 36. Portions of the stored image representation are retrieved by an image processor 38 and converted to an appropriate format for display on a monitor 40, such as a video, CCD, active matrix, or other
5 monitor. Of course, a color printer or other output device may also be used to present the data in a convenient format.

To generate the contents of calibration memory 26, a point radiation source 18 is disposed in view of the
10 detectors 12₁, 12₂, 12₃. Of course, the point radiation source 18 has physical size, which is however preferably smaller than the desired calibrated image resolution. LOR data is measured for the point source 18. The calibration memory 26 contents are not applied during this data
15 acquisition so that data without any calibration are stored in the data memory 32. Alternatively, if calibration data from a previous calibration is presently stored in calibration memory 26, this calibration may be applied as an initial condition (not shown). A
20 calibration unit 42 calculates new calibration data from the measurement of the point source 18, and the new calibration data is stored in the calibration memory 26 for use in future imaging as described above.

The method by which the calibration processor 42
25 calculates new calibration data is based upon the recognition that the LOR's should all intersect at the coordinates of the point source 18. When they fail to intersect, the calibration processor mathematically varies the coordinates of the detector heads until the separation
30 of the rays is minimized at a point corresponding to the position of the point source 18. It will be particularly noticed that the calibration is done in PET mode, with the detector system 10 in the PET configuration identical to that used for PET measurements. Thus, PET imaging can
35 commence immediately after calibration and replacement of the point radiation source 18 by a subject, e.g. a patient, with no adjustments being made to the detector

incorrect LOR's 52_d and 54_d which again result in image degradation. Of course, it is to be recognized that misalignments of two or even three positional coordinates may occur simultaneously in a given detector head, and that any or all detector heads may be misaligned. Preferably, calibration memory 26 includes corrections at least for radial misalignment Δr , tangential misalignment Δt , and orientational misalignment $\Delta \theta$ of each detector head 12₁, 12₂, 12₃.

With reference to FIGURES 1, 3, and 4 a preferred method performed by the calibration processor 42 for calibrating a coincidence imaging system which includes a plurality of radiation detectors is disclosed. As shown in FIGURE 1, the point radiation source 18 is positioned in the receiving area of the detector system 10 which is configured in the PET imaging mode. The system measures 60 a plurality of radiation events associated with the point radiation source 18. The calibration method uses a minimization method to optimize parameters of interest. More specifically, initial values are assigned 62 to the fitting parameters. The fitted parameters are preferably: Δr_i , $i=1$ to 3, where Δr_i is a correction for the radial coordinate of the i th detector; Δt_j , $j=1$ to 3, where Δt_j is a correction for the tangential coordinate of the j th detector; and $\Delta \theta_k$, $k=2$ to 3, where $\Delta \theta_k$ is a correction for the orientational coordinate of the k th detector. It will be noticed that there is no correction for the orientational coordinate of the $k=1$ detector. This is because one detector defines the reference orientation. With this reduction, there are 8 fitting parameters corresponding to the detector positional coordinate corrections. In the step 62, initial values for these positional coordinate correction parameters is typically set to zero. Alternatively, if the calibration memory 26 contains values from a previous calibration it may be preferable to use these prior values to initialize the corresponding fitting parameters.

The invention has been described with reference to the preferred embodiments. Obviously, modifications and alterations will occur to others upon reading and understanding the preceding detailed description. It is intended that the invention be construed as including all such modifications and alterations insofar as they come within the scope of the appended claims or the equivalents thereof.

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